

# DUT Guide to research presentations

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Two of the most common mistakes made during the thousands and thousands of conference presentations held at conferences each year are: 1) the presenter forgets the purpose of the presentation (to inspire, communicate, get feedback and create a network) and withdraws to a private party with his or her slides and presenter notes where the audience is essentially not needed. 2) The presenter makes the Cartesian divide between mind and body, and believes that body language, voice and interaction with the audience is unimportant when presenting scientific facts.

This DUT Guide will take you through the six easy steps to better academic presentations.

## Six easy steps to better academic presentations:

1. Make brainstorm and outlines
2. Prepare a good start and a strong ending
3. Make slides for the audience
4. Prepare for talking to (actual) people
5. Make use of your body and mind
6. Get feedback

## Background

Imagine yourself engaged in a good conversation with good friends in your home. How do you hold your body? How is your tone of voice? Imagine that you are trying to explain your newest research insight. Something you find really interesting and important. Then imagine the same content in a different context: trying to explain something you find interesting and important but to colleagues at a meeting. What would be different from the first scenario?

Context comes with affordances and constraints: some things the context supports and potentially even calls for; and some things that will be suppressed or toned down. This is true for all kinds of conversational contexts. Thus, also for the academic presentation. This article addresses how the affordances and constraints of the academic presentation will lead to producing and delivering better research presentations.

The concept of affordances and constraints stems from psychology (Gibson, 1979). This classical approach has a lot to offer academic presentation, since one of the issues is – precisely – unclear expectations and conceptualizations of the genre and register.

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***Real time vs. prepared***

A well-known challenge in research presentation is talking in real time in front of an audience but in a highly prepared and time-limited format. Part of achieving success in academic presentation is timing – to end exactly when the session chair shows you the “stop” sign. This calls for a high degree of precision and preparation. Unfortunately, many scholars prepare by writing down what they want to say, word by word.

Unsurprisingly, we as a species have had a tradition of oral narration for far longer than we have had a written one (Ong, 2012). However, in academia written language has for decades, if not centuries, been the predominant format. Naturally, you can spread your thoughts wider across geography and time when they are contained in writing. However, in more recent years formats such as TED talks, YouTube and numerous MOOC platforms have opened the doors to a shift in academic orality – it has become a road to influence, if you can tell the tale of your research in an appealing and relevant manner.

Oral and written language are profoundly different. Oral language is imperfect but conducted in real-time. Written language is perfect, but not interactive. This in turn makes academic presentations at conferences and meetings more important, precisely because the audience could have downloaded and read your paper at home and could have seen a video of you presenting it on YouTube. Due to the possibilities of disseminating your research and results online, going to a session and listening to your presentation should add something more than seeing a video or reading the paper could contribute.

The academic presentation in a modern day and time must add more to the experience and connect you as a researcher to your results, methods and contributions. The scope of an academic presentation is to make yourself relevant as a source of inspiration and as part of the network of the audience. This is best done by making use of the expectations of genre and register and to authentically present yourself as potential collaborator and relevant reference.

The process of preparing good research presentations is as old as Aristotle (387-322 B.C.). He, and later the Roman public speaker Cicero (106-43 B.C.), emphasize the importance of using a preparation model divided into five phases, and staying within one phase at a time. The five phases will be the structure for the advice given below. For an overview of the five phases, see table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>LATIN NAME OF PHASE</b>	<b>CONTENT IN PHASE</b>
1. INVENTIO	Deciding on topic and target audience Analysing the rhetorical situation and the genre
2: DISPOSITIO	Making a coherent argument and structure for the presentation
3: ELOCUTIO	Deciding on speech acts and language
4: MEMORIA	Making slides and potentially writing a manuscript or cue cards

	Rehearsing the talk
5: ACTIO	Preparing immediately before the presentation
	Delivering the presentation
	Evaluating the presentation

## 1. Make brainstorm and outlines

To some presenters, *presentation* equals *PowerPoint presentation*. This calls for preparing the presentation by opening a new presentation in PowerPoint. Don't!

This is perhaps the single biggest mistake in the history of preparing academic presentations. You will end up with an incoherent presentation consisting of random elements in the order you accidentally came up with them in. This is visible in the presentation when presenters become surprised by the order of slides, use a large number of modal verbs (e.g. could, would, should, might – signalling uncertainty) and would be unable to present had the projector been out of order.

A good academic presentation starts with a brainstorm and an outline. In the five-phase model this phase is called *Inventio* – the phase of inventing your presentation. Here you should get an overview of what you could potentially say (the topic) and what you know about audience and setting (the rhetorical situation) (Greve, 2016; McCroskey, 2015).

Since the purpose of the academic presentation is to display your research and potentially obtain feedback, you should emphasize what the audience should know in order to understand the significance of your work and to provide qualified feedback. To do this, map the potential elements of your talk. A good brainstorm is undisturbed (put away phones and computers), time-limited (no more than 20 minutes) and makes use of a structured method. This could be mind-mapping, or similar.

When you have a map of what you *could* put into your presentation take a look at the audience, the setting and the time frame and choose what *should* go into your presentation.

Now it is time to create an outline stating each element of the talk, as well as the time allocated to the element. In the rhetorical preparation model this phase is known as *Dispositio* – making your dispositions.

You need a focused outline both in terms of what is relevant in this specific presentation and how you succeed in spending time talking about what is relevant for the audience, as well as for you to show and obtain feedback on. You can borrow the classic IMRD structure from academic writing for your presentation. This provides a good framework for you to remember and for the audience to recognize. The four letters stand for:

- Introduction (stating the problem and the need for a solution as well as prior research)
- Method (how you obtained your results – the evidence of your claim)
- Results (your claim, what you found and why it is interesting)
- Discussion (problems, rebuttals, further research)

To most presenters it is easier to talk about introduction and method since it holds less conflict and less of your own work – but it is in results and discussion that you really show yourself as a researcher, which is why it is of utmost importance that you allocate time for the latter two elements.

As a good hook into the presentation, you can choose to unveil something from the results, which will be interesting and intriguing for the audience. A different approach to the hook is to describe the problem you are researching and what got you intrigued. No matter what, good starts and endings are essential.

## **2. Prepare a good start and a strong ending**

When the outline is in place, find out how you would like to start and end. If you have an outline, you can remember and feel at home in your presentation the first two and the last two minutes, your nerves will calm, and you will come across as more confident.

At conferences, the audience will hear a huge number of presentations. Yours needs to stand out. You need to attract attention to your topic and the relevance of your research. Thus, a good start is essential. Find an example, a surprising result, show a case, ask a question for the audience to reflect briefly upon – something that drags the audience into your line of thinking and sparks interest in what is to come.

A recipe for a bad start is to look into your screen while stating your name, the title of your presentation and all your affiliations. The audience want to be seen and they want to feel relevance. Thus, a recipe for a good start is to look at the audience and let them see how your presentation is going to be worth their time by stating either results, case or your motivation.

Equally, the ending of the talk is important. Sum up the outline of the talk and consider returning to the case or question from the beginning, showing the audience how we see things differently in light of your talk. At most conferences the talk will end with applause. Make rhetorical space for that by thanking people for their attention. After the applause, take questions.

The endings you should refrain from are “That’s all I had ...” or “I hope you got something out of it”. These speech acts will drag all energy out of your talk and that lack of energy will travel into the Q&A session afterwards.

By concluding the first two phases in the rhetorical model your presentation is almost done, and you would be able to give it without any other help – because you know the flow and the overall outline, and you know how to attract attention and to close your part of the session down.

## **3. Make slides for the audience**

Now that outline, start, ending and argument are in place, it is finally time to open your computer and start producing visuals. For obvious reasons making slides is not part of the old Greek model, but nevertheless it would count as part of the fourth phase called Memoria – remembering the presentation.

The important point here is to make slides that assist the audience’s understanding rather than your memory. What would make your points, your data and your results visual and easy

to decode and understand for the listeners? That is the most important question when making your visuals.

Make as few slides as possible and make them so that they assist the perception and understanding of the audience. If you have only a limited number of slides it is easier for you to control time, because you can measure out how much you say instead of ending up skipping multiple slides you did not have time to cover. The slides are not communicators of the outline or content – you are! The slides are visual aids for the audience. Apart from the first and last slide, consider using the IMRD structure for the slides. The presentation will be easy to follow for the audience and easy for you to remember – both of which increase the success of your presentation.

The dos and don'ts in slides are well documented online. A recommended resource is that of Garr Reynolds (2014). His online advice is also worth following. However, four basic tenets of advice for academic slides are:

1. Refrain from using bullet lists – we tend to decode them as prioritized and they are usually just brainstormers. They are boring and often mainly made for the speaker. Illustrate your point instead – or make one simple point that you can flesh out in your narration.
2. Do not write whole sentences (unless it is a quote) – they will make you read aloud, which is boring and hard to do well.
3. Make or find relevant illustrations, graphs etc. that are easy for the audience to decode and that hold information for you to explain naturally.
4. Don't ask questions in writing (unless you actually want the audience to answer): questions signal insecurity – statements work much better. Use the slide headline to direct the attention and focus of the audience, should they drift for a moment during your presentation.

The most common mistake I have observed over 15 years of training academic presenters is too much text in too many slides. Everyone knows it is wrong, but many end up doing it anyway. A good rule of thumb is to have one slide per 2-3 minutes, meaning that five slides plus title slide and references would be ideal for a 15-minute talk. Making light, precise slides that are easy to decipher will win the audience over much more effectively and communicate your message in a much clearer way.

#### **4. Prepare for talking to (actual) people**

How would you normally prepare for giving an academic presentation? Most presenters I have met sat in a hotel room or office space, laptop in lap and whispered their way through the slides.

Going back to the scenarios in the beginning of this article, sitting on your sofa and talking to friends involves a different level of stress and risk as well as different bodily posture and interaction to standing in front of colleagues and giving a talk.

You can either present in front of someone, in front of a mirror, or you can put up your mobile phone where people's faces would be and record yourself. All three situations will give you the feeling of someone looking at you and interacting with you. Time the presentation and know that it will most likely last longer when giving the real presentation than at home in front of the mirror.

When you rehearse, do not forget to put in the little breaks, rhetorical questions, room for laughter and applause. Otherwise, it might catch you by surprise when you are presenting for real.

The general recommendation is to rehearse shorter presentations around six times. When rehearsing you should give the whole presentation from beginning to end and then make your corrections. After corrections have been made, go through it one more time, make corrections and repeat. This way you rehearse the coherence and structure of the talk rather than individual elements. If you start again each time you stumble upon something you want to correct you will end up with a very well-rehearsed beginning and an under-rehearsed end.

The last important point when rehearsing is that you should try to tell a story about your research rather than reading a story from manuscript or memory. If your structure is clear and the slides supportive, you ought to be able to tell the story in your own (scientific) words. The expectation for a talk is not perfection. When we talk, we start sentences with no ending, and we make little mistakes. That is to be expected in oral communication. If your wording is too close to written language, it is deciphered as such and you lose the feeling of real time and importance. If what you say adds nothing to your paper, then reading the paper would be easier.

Preparation should thus be oral, as close to the actual situation as possible, and with a focus on telling a coherent story rather than saying specific words in a specific order.

### **5. Make use of your body**

From the moment the audience can see you, the presentation has started. While you set up your computer and find your presentation, we can follow. Check that you have the right cables to connect. Choose the wording of files and folders carefully and consider your background picture if you use your own computer. This considers that fifth and last phase of the rhetorical preparation: Actio – the actual performance.

Your body does not betray you and it is not communicating anything on its own. This dichotomy between body language and language is old-fashioned and wrong. You are your body, including thoughts, voice, body language etc.

Being nervous in a presentation is most frequently due to poor/incorrect preparation and fear of loss of control and loss of face. Nerves are manageable and will in turn reduce the fear of losing control.

If you know exactly how to enter and exit the presentation, this will reduce nervousness. Most people feel nervous at the beginning and the end of the presentation. This is exactly why the beginning and end are so important. If you know what to do, it reduces the anxiety of doing it.

During the presentation, make eye contact with the audience. Look them in the eye. All of them. Even the sceptical ones. Everyone wants to be seen and if you show that you dare to look at them and invite them into your talk, they will be easier to engage. If you look away, into the floorboards or stare at the wall at the end of the room, they will start wondering about your behaviour rather than what you say.

Never direct attention towards your nervousness by addressing it verbally. Either the audience cannot see it, and then they do not have to know; or they see, and there is no reason to emphasize it.

Bring a presentation remote. This will allow you to move away from the screen.

Stand on both feet, approximately hip width apart. You will look confident and trustworthy. Never cross your legs. If you find yourself standing with all your weight on just one leg or with your legs crossed, just move back to your good position with equal weight on each leg.

Just before entering the stage, roll your shoulders back three times. This will allow you to have a broad and open chest, making it easier to breathe and helping you look more confident.

If possible, have the canvas or screen on your right-hand side. This way, you stand in direct continuation of the reading direction of the audience. They will look at the slide and then look at you.

When you deliver important messages like your hook in the beginning of the presentation, your most significant results and your closing remarks, stand in the middle of the room. This way there is a clear visual difference between when you present your overall argument and when we should really pay attention.

If relevant and possible, use visuals other than slides. This could include bringing an artefact, writing on a flip board or blackboard or similar. By writing or showing something, you break the continuous flow of slides and this in turn directs attention to important parts of your talk.

A good way of learning how your body performs during presentations is to film yourself. Play the movie in fast-forward, and you will know if you have any repetitive patterns that are drawing attention away from your message.

## **6. Get feedback**

The last piece of advice is to get feedback. Your mobile phone will provide you with some insight into how you perform. However, a trusted colleague can potentially help you more.

The kind of feedback you are looking for is formative rather than summative. It is not so much an overall evaluation or grade that will help you, but an assessment of how you can progress as an academic presenter.

If you have been working with a specific element of your presentation you could ask for feedback on that. E.g. how you interact with the audience, how your outline works or how you handle questions.

A simple framework for feedback is to have two questions:

1. What went really well and how is that transferable into the next presentation?
2. What went less satisfactorily and how can you avoid a similar situation next time?

It is important to focus on what went well first – otherwise you might end up correcting something that in turn ruins something that is really good.

You will most likely progress as a presenter for the rest of your career. Technology will change, conference concepts will change, audiences will change. As a presenter, you will have



to change with all that. Thus, it is important that you always self-evaluate and, preferably, also ask a colleague for feedback occasionally.

### **Concluding remarks on becoming a better presenter**

The key to becoming a better presenter is experience and knowledge of the genre.

See each presentation as a learning point in your progression. In almost any line of career presentation is a fundamental skill and, as such, it can be developed.

This article provides you with five easy steps to take towards becoming a better academic presenter. Bear in mind that an academic presentation is an opportunity to show and interact about your results with likeminded people – it is not an exam, but the opening of a discussion.

There is no one way of delivering a good academic presentation, but all good presentations have the following in common: an enthusiastic presenter, a coherent and relevant story, new knowledge that could not have been obtained elsewhere and a shared experience with like-minded people. That is in its essence making use of the affordances of the academic presentation.

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